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ABSTRACT

In January 1983, the American public read or saw hard-hitting allegations of leftist bias by the National Council of Churches (NCC) in the largest circulation magazine, "Reader's Digest," and on the top-rated television program, "60 Minutes." A study examined the extent to which the media set the agenda for debate on this issue. It was hypothesized (1) that the twin attacks on the NCC would be the catalyst for a surge of treatment of the issue in religious periodicals and general circulation media; (2) that given the explosive nature of allegations of Marxist bias, especially applied to a religious body, the allegations themselves would draw more comment from religious media than would the merits of the substantive issue raised; and (3) that editorial reactions in religious periodicals would focus on the "60 Minutes" segment more than on the "Reader's Digest" article. A wide range of print media was chosen for sampling for relevant content from the period of January 1981 through January 1985--two years before and after the date of the attacks. Hypothesis one was supported, while hypothesis two was supported only in the case of interdenominational religious journals. Hypothesis three was not supported quantitatively, but a more significant pattern emerged in the qualitative dimension, as "60 Minutes" appeared to provoke much more commentary than did "Reader's Digest." Results indicated that no firm conclusions can be drawn as to mass media agenda-setting in this case. Findings suggest, however, that using mass media to dramatize an issue carries with it destructive side effects. (Tables of data are included, and 47 footnotes are appended.) (NKA)

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES' ALLEGED LEFTIST BIAS: TO WHAT DEGREE DID TWO MAJOR MEDIA SET THE AGENDA FOR DEBATE ON THE ISSUE?

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INTRODUCTION

Agenda-setting Studies

In the fifteen years since McCombs and Shaw's landmark agenda-setting study of North Carolina voters in 1971,[1] the dominant research pattern for this concept has been to survey the salience of certain issues in respondents' minds before media attention is given them and then the salience after exposure to media treatment. If a dramatic shift upward is recorded in respondents' awareness of or concern with the issues in question, it can be said that the media have "set the agenda" through their coverage of the issues, no other causes being apparent. In countless studies, the concept has been applied to voters,[2] to government elites,[3] to consumers of advertising messages,[4] and other types of publics. Significance generally is seen in what the respondents said was important over time.

In this study, the respondents are not voters or consumers, but the editors of several kinds of periodicals, and the question is what affected their coverage of the issue of the alleged leftist bias of the National Council of Churches during a four-year period--two years before a double-barrelled attack by the Reader's Digest and CBS' "60 Minutes" in January, 1983, and two years afterward. How much did these two giant media set the agenda for other media? To answer this question we have the most precise of measures, which is how much the editors of other media chose to print about the issue in their own publications over that four-year period.

But the concept has deeper meanings than mere volume of coverage. We should also ask to what extent media set the terms of debate on the issue, not just that they make the issue prominent. Further, are they

able to keep an issue before the public long enough for reasoned debate and understanding? Or are they, in Lippmann's famous metaphor of 1922, like "the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision"?[5]

The Issue Studied: Alleged Bias by the NCC

The National Council of Churches (NCC), the nation's largest Christian ecumenical organization with 32 Protestant and Orthodox denominations representing 40,000,000 members,[6] is no stranger to controversy. But during most of the years since its founding in 1950, the arguments have tended to be intramural ones brought up by conservatives within member churches who felt that NCC and denominational leaders veered too sharply to the liberal side in both theological and political pronouncements. Only an occasional story in the general media carried the debate to the broader public.

But in January, 1983, a substantial portion of the American public read or saw hard-hitting allegations of leftist bias by the NCC in the largest circulation magazine, Reader's Digest ("Do You Know Where Your Church Offerings Go?")[7] and the then top-rated prime time television program, CBS' "60 Minutes" (The Gospel According to Whom?").[8] Seldom is there such a clear base point in the continuum in which an issue develops public exposure. These media treatments were in turn news pegs for a flurry of articles in individual church denominational publications, in those aimed at a broader religious audience (e.g., The Christian Century), in news magazines and in the usually more politically oriented journals of opinion.

The Reader's Digest attack was no surprise. As far back as 1950, it had attacked a number of Methodist leaders in an article entitled

"Methodism's Pink Fringe."[9] The Christian Century editorially greeted the 1983 article with the headline, "Ho-Hum, the 'Digest' Is At It Again."[10]But "60 Minutes" was another matter. Viewers accustomed to seeing Mike Wallace and his co-workers skewer corporate executives or elements of the New Religious Right such as the Moral Majority were jolted that the "liberal" CBS News division would use its journalistic weapons on the "liberal" NCC. Yet there was Morley Safer in front of a scene at an Indiana Methodist church saying that the NCC (and the World Council of Churches) were giving funds to causes "that seem closer to the Soviet-Cuban view of the world than Logansport, Indiana's."

Both the Reader's Digest article and the "60 Minutes" segment reached this point of view: that the National Council of Churches has exhibited a leftist bias in its pronouncements about oppression in Marxist and right-wing regimes, and that it has funded pro-Marxist, at times even violently revolutionary, groups in the Third World. Both media documented their presentations with references to NCC funds going to groups that published pro-Castro propaganda pamphlets, references to funds given in aid of Vietnam's "New Economic Zones" (controversial and called concentration camps by critics), and references to an alleged imbalance or tilt to the left in NCC statements about human rights abuses around the world. Abuses by right-wing nations were eagerly attacked, it was said, while similar abuses in Marxist Third World nations were less often singled out. Further, the United States seemed often to be portrayed as the prime inciter of trouble in international affairs (e.g., in Central America). "60 Minutes" had the more dramatic message, opening with Safer suggesting that a church congregation's money might be "doing this man's work" (image of Fidel

Castro on screen). Both media relied prominently on the Institute on Religion and Democracy, to be further identified shortly.

It must be stipulated at the outset that this study will not attempt to prove or disprove the validity of these accusations, but rather to measure the impact of these two media in accelerating discussion of the issue and the terms of debate on it in several types of church and general periodicals. But the reader should be aware that in alleging pro-Marxist sympathies at the NCC these two media were entering forbidden territory for American journalism. A legacy of the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy is that such allegations, however well- or ill-founded and buttressed by evidence, will be greeted by charges of "McCarthyism." And as we shall see, that happened in this case. The emotions triggered by that charge at times pre-empted serious discussion of the substance of the issue.

In agenda-setting studies, one must be certain that some overt event apart from the media coverage does not account for the attention given to the issue in question. In the present case, for example, did the NCC take a position or did something happen to it that by itself would lead to attention from many quarters? No such evidence exists here. The Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes" treatments are themselves indicative: almost none of the incidents of bias by the NCC that they cited were new and many of their references were to events even then several years old, a point noted by critics of the article and program. The New York Times and the three main news weeklies were included in the content study in part to check on this potential factor. None of the three news weeklies had any coverage of the NCC in the two years prior to January, 1983, and the Times' only recent article (Nov. 3, 1982)[11] had focused on two

things: the expected treatments of the NCC by the Reader's Digest and CBS News, and the criticism of the council by a group called the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD).

The IRD was the significant new "actor" in the playing out of the "leftist NCC" issue. Until its founding in 1981, such criticism of the NCC came mostly from the political right, from the New Religious Right (the Rev. Jerry Falwell et al.), and from some splinter groups within the mainline religious denominations (e.g., the evangelical Good News caucus within the United Methodist Church). The Times described the IRD as a "new type of critic."[12] Its founders included Lutheran theologian Richard John Neuhaus, Catholic scholar and writer Michael Novak, AFL-CIO executive David Jessup, and the Rev. Edmund Robb, a Methodist and leader of the Good News caucus. Other well-known theologians and historians were on the board of directors. Though the IRD would later be described as a right-wing group, its leaders were in many instances associated with the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s. Jessup is a member of Social Democrats, U.S.A., which is socialist but strongly anti-communist. The IRD grew up under the wing of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, a neoconservative political group that is anti-communist in foreign policy but generally liberal Democratic in domestic policy, with Ben Wattenberg and the late Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.) among its major figures. The IRD, a major source for both the Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes," attracted conservative foundation support (Scaife family, Olin and Smith Richardson), and was given occasional media coverage in the 1981-83 period.[13]

This writer started the study with several expectations of what might be found, and the reasoning for these will precede the formal statement

of hypotheses. The basic expectation was that the Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes" would stimulate a great deal more interest in the NCC issue among other media than had been shown earlier. Certainly this would seem to be true of periodicals associated with member churches of the NCC, the first group selected for content study, based on a preliminary reading in several of them. A United Church of Christ minister in San Antonio predicted in an off-the-record interview that the church periodical coverage would be sparse before 1983, his reason being that "the churches know that the liberal activism of the NCC is a sore point among many of their members, and their publication editors don't like to raise divisive issues if they don't have to." This would presumably be especially true of those periodicals that are the official voices of their denominations.

But after the major media attacks of January, 1983, their thinking might run this way: (1) to avoid an issue that their readers were exposed to elsewhere might appear strange, and in any case their readers would have a heightened awareness of it, and (2) those editors who thought the attacks misguided and unfair would be impelled by anger to respond to them and by a sense of duty to the church to clarify the issue for their readers.

But what of other, more general media that are not associated with the NCC? A second content study covered three of the more influential interdenominational religious magazines, and a third covered still more general media: the New York Times, the three major news weeklies and four journals of opinion. (See "Materials Chosen" for complete listing.) It was thought that Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes" would raise the NCC issue to the threshold level of attention needed for general media to define it as

newsworthy by their standard definitions of news.

The charges raised against the NCC were complex and wide-ranging. Given the limitations of staff and space of the church media, it was predicted that their response would focus mostly on the fact of the attacks rather than detailed analysis of their substance. Added to this is the emotional dimension. To accuse a prestigious group of aiding Marxist causes is bound to hit a nerve even in this late day, and bring to mind witch-hunting tactics, whether or not the analogy is fair. One would expect the larger religious weeklies to attempt lengthier analyses of the issue than the smaller church monthlies.

Another interesting speculation was whether the media response to Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes" would vary markedly in intensity. The guess was that "60 Minutes" would, because of the drama of its visual treatment, attract more attention and rebuttal. And its attack was more of a surprise. Methodist Bishop James Armstrong, president of the NCC in 1983, reinforced this thinking when he said: "The Reader's Digest article was expected and predictable, but the '60 Minutes' show could do us great damage."[14]

METHODOLOGY

Hypotheses

Hypothesis I: That the twin attacks on the National Council of Churches by the Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes" will be the catalyst for a surge of treatment of the issue in church and religious periodicals and in the general circulation media.

Hypothesis II: That, given the explosive nature of allegations of Marxist bias, especially as applied to a religious body, the fact of the allegations themselves will draw more comment from religious media than

the merits of the substantive issue raised. This comment will center on media ethics issues of sensationalism and possible "McCarthyism."

Hypothesis III: That editors of religious periodicals in their own editorial reactions will give the "60 Minutes" segment more attention than the Reader's Digest article.

Materials Chosen

It should be noted that the National Council of Churches and the World council of Churches are often joint targets of charges of leftist bias, and they were in this instance. The Reader's Digest had a separate article on the WCC in its August, 1982, issue,[15] and "60 Minutes" followed its segment on the NCC with one on the WCC in a similar vein. The decision was made to limit this study to the NCC for reasons similar to those of the United Methodist Reporter in its investigative report: The NCC is a creature of the American Protestant-Orthodox establishment, whereas the WCC, based in Geneva, Switzerland, has only minority representation and no control by American churches.

Member denominations of the NCC range in size from the United Methodist Church (9,500,000 members) down to the General Convention of the Swedenborgian Church (1,820 members). Their respective positions on a liberal-to-conservative continuum is a highly subjective judgment. It appeared that, rather than attempt a representative sampling of the 32 denominations, or attempt to cover all of them, one should center the study on the larger members that control NCC affairs, and that are large enough to have nationally circulated periodicals. Accordingly, the NCC member content analysis covers media serving denominations with at least a million members. For each of these, a periodical of most general lay circulation was studied. The twelve publications thus chosen

were: (1) AD (official publication of the United Church of Christ and the United Presbyterian Church until AD was discontinued late in 1983), (2) AME Christian Recorder (official publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church), (3) The American Baptist (official publication of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.), (4) The Disciple (official publication of the Christian Church--Disciples of Christ), (5) The Episcopalian (independently edited for the Episcopal Church), (6) The Lutheran (official publication of the Lutheran Church in America), (7) National Baptist Voice (official publication of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A.), (8) The Orthodox Church (official publication of the Orthodox Church in America), (9) The Orthodox Observer (official publication of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North/South America), (10) Presbyterian Survey (official publication of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.), (11) The Star of Zion (official publication of the Methodist Episcopal Zion Church), and (12) the United Methodist Reporter (independently edited for the United Methodist Church). These publications serve denominations with almost 34,000,000 of the 40,000,000 members belonging to NCC churches.

As stated earlier, several other kinds of media were also studied. Three were nondenominational religious magazines. They were: The Christian Century (a weekly for "progressive" church people and close to the mainline Protestant churches in the NCC), Christianity and Crisis (a biweekly Protestant journal of opinion that leans toward provocative topics and is generally friendly with the liberal churches), and Christianity Today (a semi-monthly that emphasizes evangelical religion and is often critical of the NCC).

Non-church-related publications studied included the three main news weeklies (Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report), four political journals of opinion (The Nation, National Review, New Republic and The Progressive), and the New York Times. The news weeklies and journals of opinion were valuable checks on the political news dimension of the issue studied, and the Times, as the daily newspaper of record, was included as a check on possible influences of outside news events on the agenda-setting findings.

Preliminary research indicated that no purpose would be served in going back more than two years from the January, 1983, base point on the coverage of the NCC issue, and later findings tend to confirm that decision. Another two-year span up to January, 1985, gives ample time for the media coverage of the issue and reactions to the two large media attacks to run their course. Thus, there is symmetry in the four-year span of this content study.

Content Units Coded

For all media, a census rather than a sampling of relevant content was carried out, the articles, columns, and editorials coded. "Relevant" in this case denotes all news/editorial matter in which the issue of the NCC's alleged leftist bias was either the dominant or at least a prominent element. (Letters to the editor were originally considered for inclusion, but given the tendency of editors to balance off pro and con letters, they seemed less meaningful barometers than other content types.)

Two measures test the basic agenda-setting hypothesis. They are: (1) the number of column inches a given periodical devotes to the studied issue during six-month periods over the four years, and (2) what proportion

of the content items studied (with the article, column or editorial being the unit of analysis) used the Reader's Digest or "60 Minutes" treatments as news pegs or main reference points in the period after January, 1983.

For the second hypothesis, only content that reaches an evaluative conclusion was coded. (A news item that neutrally reported that the NCC had filed a Fairness Doctrine complaint against CBS would not, for example, be included here.) Coding was on two levels: (1) each item was coded as to its point of view, from a defense of the NCC to agreement with media charges, and (2) each item was coded for specific argumentative points raised (e.g., "NCC officials have naive, romantic views of Marxist revolutionaries," or "the media used innuendo and guilt by association"). Coding categories are listed in an appendix to Table 3.

The third hypothesis, whether "60 Minutes" was seen as having made the more noteworthy attack, was more subjectively tested by analyses of only editorials carried in periodicals of NCC member churches.

FINDINGS

Hypothesis I

In an operational definition, this hypothesis will be considered as having been validated if the volume of coverage of the NCC issue in column inches in the first six months of 1983 exceeds coverage in the previous two years; secondly, if at least two-thirds of the content items in that six-month period cite either the Reader's Digest or "60 Minutes" as news pegs or reference points.

On this basis, did agenda-setting occur? Tables 1 and 2 support the hypothesis emphatically. The NCC church media ran 282 column inches on the NCC bias issue in all of 1981 and 1982, and 1916 inches just from

Table 1

NCC MEMBER CHURCH MEDIA COVERAGE OF LEFTIST BIAS ISSUE

News/Editorial content, in No. of Items, Column Inches and %s in 6-Mo. Periods

Publication	1981		1982		1983		1984		Tot.
	Jan-June	July-Dec	Jan-June	July-Dec	Jan-June	July-Dec	Jan-June	July-Dec	
AD	---	1 / 9" 10.6%	1 / 13" 15.3%	1 / 15" 17.6%	5 / 48" 56.5%	(AD ceases publication)			85
AME Christian Recorder	---	---	---	---	2 / 125" 100%	---	---	---	125
American Baptist	---	---	---	---	---	---	1 / 60" 33%	4 / 120" 67%	180
Disciple	---	---	1 / 5" 3.5%	1 / 30" 22%	8 / 93" 68%	1 / 4" 3%	1 / 5" 3.5%	---	137
Episcopalian	---	---	---	---	5 / 114" 97.5%	1 / 3" 2.5%	---	---	117
Lutheran	2 / 8" 6.8%	1 / 6" 5.1%	1 / 10" 8.5%	1 / 7" 6%	5 / 64" 54.7%	1 / 2" 1.8%	1 / 9" 7.7%	1 / 11" 9.4%	117
National Baptist Voice	---	---	---	---	1 / 19" 100%	---	---	---	19
Orthodox Church	---	---	---	---	2 / 26" 57%	1 / 20" 43%	---	---	46
Orthodox Observer	---	---	---	---	1 / 11" 48%	---	---	1 / 12" 52%	23
Presbyterian Survey	---	---	---	---	1 / 6" 32%	---	2 / 13" 68%	---	19
Star of Zion	---	---	---	---	5 / 94" 100%	---	---	---	94
United Methodist Reporter	1 / 15" .9%	1 / 23" 1.3%	6 / 108" 6.1%	4 / 33" 1.8%	40 / 1316 74.7%	3 / 75" 4.3%	7 / 171" 9.7%	3 / 20" 1.2%	1761
Total col. in.	23"	38"	136"	85"	1916"	104"	258"	163"	2723"

Table 2 INTERDENOMINATIONAL AND GENERAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF NCC LEFTIST BIAS ISSUE

News/Editorial Content, in No. of Items, Column inches and %s in 6-Mo. Periods

Interdenominational	1981		1982		1983		1984		Tot
	Jan-June	July-Dec	Jan-June	July-Dec	Jan-June	July-Dec	Jan-June	July-Dec	
Christian Century	---	2 / 76" 12.7%	2 / 88" 14.6%	2 / 46" 7.7%	6 / 285" 47.4%	1 / 9" 1.5%	---	4 / 97 16.1%	621
Christianity and Crisis	---	---	2 / 166" 11.8%	---	6 / 870" 61.9%	2 / 105" 7.5%	1 / 60" 4.3%	3 / 204" 14.5%	1405
Christianity Today	---	---	2 / 86" 29%	2 / 25" 8.4%	2 / 90" 30.3%	---	---	3 / 96" 32.3%	297
Totals:	0	76	340	71	1245	114	60	397	2323
News Weeklies									
Newsweek	---	---	---	---	1 / 40" 100%	---	---	---	40
Time	---	1 / 10" 13.8%	---	---	2 / 60" 82%	---	---	1 / 3" 4.2%	73
U.S. News and World Report	---	---	---	---	1 / 30" 33.3%	1 / 60" 66.7%	---	---	90
Totals:	0	10	0	0	130	60	0	3	203
Journals of Opinion									
The Nation	---	---	---	---	1 / 68" 100%	---	---	---	68
National Review	---	1 / 30" 50%	---	---	1 / 30" 50%	---	---	---	60
New Republic	---	---	---	---	1 / 80" 100%	---	---	---	80
Progressive	---	---	---	---	1 / 90" 100%	---	---	---	90
Totals:	0	30	0	0	268	0	0	0	298
New York Times	---	1 / 18" 8.7%	2 / 31" 15%	1 / 26" 12.5%	3 / 89" 43%	---	2 / 43" 20.8%	---	207

January through June, 1983. It will be noted that the United Methodist Reporter, a broadsheet weekly, dominates the figures. But even with UMR excluded, the basic finding stands. Other NCC church media had 103 inches in 1981-82, and 600 inches in Jan-June 1983. Predictably, the issue began to die down later in 1983, and the last 19 months of the period covered shows NCC media giving 571 inches to the issue.

Of equal significance is the finding that, of the 75 editorials, columns, evaluative articles and news stories carried in the NCC member media during Jan-June, 1983, 66 used either the Reader's Digest or "60 Minutes" or both as news pegs.

If church periodicals normally stress inspirational articles and news notes on church activities rather than controversy, the three interdenominational journals studied are a different matter. The entire range of religious thought and activity, including controversies that affect them, is within their purview. Thus it is not surprising that they had been following the NCC issue before the general media took it up, much of their coverage prior to 1983 centering on the founding of the IRD in 1981 and on some of the early news events created by the IRD. Still, their combined coverage rose from 487 inches during 1981 and 1982 to 1245 inches in the first half of 1983. And they continued to follow the issue, with 511 more inches in the 18 months through 1984. Christianity and Crisis, which describes itself as a journal of opinion that discusses church policies "from a detached and sometimes critical perspective,"[16] easily led this group in coverage, and devoted its entire March 21, 1983, issue to the matter of the validity of the Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes" attacks. (It was outspokenly negative about both media.) Fifteen of the 17 content items in these three journals in the first half of 1983 used

the two major media attacks as takeoff points.

Except for a 10-inch news item in Time in November, 1981,[17] about both Bishop James Armstrong's election as NCC president and the early charges of leftist bias by the council from the then-new IRD, the issue didn't exist for the news weeklies until the Reader's Digest and CBS opened it up. All three of the news weeklies based their articles on the two media pieces at issue here. After June, 1983, the issue faded just as quickly, with only U.S. News and World Report running a follow-up article.[18]

A similar finding applies to the four political journals of opinion, representing a spectrum from left to right. Nearly all of their coverage came in the wake of the pivotal January, 1983, attacks, the single exception being a 1981 article on the IRD in the National Review (its author, Michael Novak, is one of IRD's founders).[19]

We look to the New York Times to test our perceptions of important or newsworthy developments. In this case, the Times had given continuing coverage to the NCC-IRD conflict starting with IRD's founding in 1981. It carried a 26-inch story on Nov. 3, 1982,[20] which anticipated correctly the hostile coverage CBS and the Reader's Digest were preparing, and it carried a 40-inch story on Feb. 16, 1983,[21] that centered on the IRD as the principal source for both media attacks in January. The Times can be seen as perhaps as much an agenda-setter for for CBS and the Reader's Digest as it is a reactor to their coverage. For the Times, the IRD would appear to have been the main actor in the story, not the other media.

Hypothesis II

The prediction that attention in religious media coverage would

focus on media ethics and sources rather than on the substantive issue of NCC bias was based on random preliminary reading in a few of the religious publications. Results were decidedly mixed for the 12 NCC denominational media, but decisive for the three broader religious journals, as Table 3 documents. The operational definition of validity used here is this: if the evaluative content items use argumentative points centered on media or sources and their motives at least twice as often as argumentative points based on the substantive issues raised by the Reader's Digest and CBS, the hypothesis will be considered to have been validated.

Predictably, most of the 12 NCC member church media defended the council. There were exceptions, such as the Orthodox Church, which openly admitted that the ecumenical movement "is hardly popular among the Orthodox in America," citing the "peculiar trends which have been predominant" in the national and world councils.[22] It proposed limiting Orthodox participation to the NCC's Faith and Order Commission. Even so, the editor scored media coverage of the NCC as confused and misleading.

The typical NCC member media pattern was to run one or two columns or editorials giving the editor's views of the issue and its coverage by the Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes," and otherwise cover developments with news stories that in the main reflected NCC sources and points of view. Just after both major attacks, the NCC prepared a lengthy, point-by-point rebuttal of the charges of leftist bias and funding,[23] and church media were able to refer to the availability of this material at individual churches. Thus, the editors did not feel compelled to undertake the lengthy rebuttal themselves.

Table 3

ARGUMENTATIVE POINTS RAISED BY RELIGIOUS MEDIA RESPONDING TO RD AND CBS: MEDIA/SOURCE FOCUS VS. SUBSTANTIVE ISSUE FOCUS*

Period: January-June 1983
Coverage: Only Evaluative Content Items

Media:	United Methodist Reporter	11 Other NCC Media	Inter-denom. Journals	All Religious Media
I. Arguments focusing on Media/sources and their motives				
A. Favorable	1	0	2	3
B. Critical	12	13	23	48
II. Arguments focusing on substantive issues regarding NCC				
A. Favorable to NCC	11	8	6	25
B. Critical of NCC	9	3	3	15

*Appendix to Table 3: Categories of arguments tabulated

I. (A): 1. Media and sources have honestly motivated, well-documented case.
(B): 1. Critics trying to impose alignment with Reagan foreign policy.
2. IRD as source is creature of right-wing foundation funding.
3. Media sensationalize, distort view of overall NCC programs.
4. Media use lies, innuendo, other unethical tactics.

II. (A): 1. Point-by-point rebuttal of leftist bias charges,with evidence.
2. Concern for oppressed justifies political agitation by NCC.
3. Western nations get more scrutiny because greater chance for impact then with East bloc.
4. Need to keep lines open to church in East; avoid conflict.
5. Ecumenical movement more important than divisive political issue:
(B): 1. Liberal NCC staff out of touch with laity.
2. NCC has romantic, naive view of Marxist revolutionaries.
3. Loose NCC structure lets boards take radical policy steps.
4. NCC reacts too defensively to criticism, adopts siege mentality.

One clear finding is that almost all the religious media, whether fully supportive of the NCC or not, tended to see the Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes" journalistic work in a critical light. Several publications made explicit reference to "McCarthyism" while others spoke darkly of "right wing" funding of the IRD in an attempt to discredit by ideological association.

United Methodist Reporter: A Special Case. All tables show the Reporter dominant in quantity of coverage of the issue, and broader in the type and direction of coverage than the other church media. The Reporter is the largest circulation Protestant newspaper (over half a million)[24] serving the largest denomination in the NCC with 9.5 million members. Owned by the United Methodist Conference of Texas and New Mexico, it is independently edited at its Dallas offices and, as a broadsheet weekly newspaper, has the staff and space to cover issues in depth if it chooses. In this case, it so chose.

The Reporter was scornful of the Reader's Digest article, labeling it "a mixture of facts, half-truths, distortions and innuendo," with no attempt made to present an opposing point of view.[25] But the Reporter's initial reaction to the "60 Minutes" segment was in many ways positive, though it pointed out that the "60 Minutes" format, with its confrontational approach, could not be expected to provide a balanced, general profile of any person or group.[26] Editor Spurgeon Dunnam III wrote that church and NCC leaders had brought on much of their trouble by not responding to concerns by church members about "observable, statistically verifiable imbalance in the rhetoric and goals of numerous programs with political overtones."[27] He pointed out that "60 Minutes" had included friends as well as critics of the NCC, and cautioned friends of the

council to avoid developing a "siege mentality."

Reporter issues during February, 1983, carried a number of news stories about the controversy, including a full page in the Feb. 15 issue devoted to an official, point-by-point reply to the "60 Minutes" charges by the leadership of the United Methodist Church. But the major response dominated both the April 1 and April 8 issues, a culmination of "the most exhaustive investigation in the Reporter's 136-year history."[28] Reporters fanned out over the country, some to interview NCC officials and go through council files, and their findings were not always good news for the council leaders. Among them: (1) the leftist tilt, which NCC critics so often alleged and its defenders denied, was "undeniably real, both in quantitative and qualitative terms;[29] (2) in the previous five years the NCC had devoted at least four times more effort to addressing abuses by dictatorial rightest regimes (such as South Korea) than to those by dictatorial leftist regimes (such as South Vietnam). But the Reporter found the bias to be mostly rhetorical, and found no basis for the accusation that NCC member churches' funds bought guns for Marxist terrorists. Eleven major articles and editorials in the April 1 and 8 issues explored every aspect of NCC work, and the overall balance is reflected in Table 3. More than any of the other church papers, the Reporter in its coverage disproves--in its case reverses--Hypothesis II's assumption that the attacks themselves and not the substantive issues raised would dominate treatment in the church press. The Reporter ultimately concluded that the NCC's problems were neither as "malignant" as foes alleged nor as "benign" as defenders claimed, and called for a tighter organizational structure with better accountability by committees and a more evenhanded stance on human

rights by the council.[30]

Interdenominational Magazines. The more general religious magazines were another matter, and appear to support Hypothesis II. Christian Century and Christianity and Crisis, both close to the mainline churches and the NCC, aimed their sights at the Reader's Digest, "60 Minutes" and especially at the IRD as the presumed major instigator of the charges printed and aired. Christian Century had been following the IRD from its start in 1981, and quickly concluded that it had sold a biased story to the two big media. But its "ho-hum" reaction to the Reader's Digest article, and an amusing Digest fable ("Laughter in Pleasantville," by contributing editor Robert McAfee Brown)[31] turned to bitter attack on both "60 Minutes" and the IRD after the former's broadcast. Brown, in "The Gospel According to Morley Safer,"[32] said the program was so "laced with vitriol" that a second casual parody or fable was not possible. Brown then undertook a lengthy analysis of the errors of the CBS piece, with emphasis on what he felt were dishonest reporting methods and overly dramatic symbols (e.g., terrorists waving guns supposedly paid for with church funds). Overall, as Table 3 shows, the focus of the magazines in this group was on the media and the IRD, not on the issue of NCC bias. Christian Century logged 12 arguments on media/sources and only two on substantive issues. However, it should be noted that Editor James M. Wall did acknowledge some basis for the media attacks when he wrote in a March, 1983, editorial that staff members of the NCC

> have often been guilty of a romantic naivete in relating to revolutions in developing countries. It is difficult to find ecumenical-agency staff members, zealous about overthrowing dictatorships, who are willing to acknowledge faults in guerrilla tactics and style. This is in part a consequence of their desire to maintain good relations with the revolutionaries. And, frankly, in some cases it is due to a personal commitment to Marxist interpretations.[33]

But Wall saw the IRD, in its "blatant embrace of the Reagan foreign policy," as showing a similar type of bias. Christian Century did, though, take care to run a 48-inch response to its criticism by IRD founder Richard John Neuhaus.[34]

Christianity and Crisis, as a journal of opinion, had been following to IRD, too. It didn't even bother to respond to the Reader's Digest article, but hit "60 Minutes" hard on Feb. 21, writer John Wicklein accusing CBS News of using sensational, biased program development to prove a thesis decided upon in advance.[35] The entire March 21 issue hit at different aspects of the two big media attacks on the NCC, the longest article tracing the history and right-wing connections of the IRD.[36] Other articles confronted head-on the issue whether religious bodies have a mission to speak out on political matters (the writer felt they did)[37] and exploring some of the bureaucratic and communication weaknesses of the NCC.[38] But again, media/source arguments outweighed substantive issue arguments by a 2-1 margin.

Not surprisingly, the evangelical magazine Christianity Today, no particular friend of the NCC and the liberal mainline churches, had quite a different view of the whole issue. It had given space during 1982 to several articles sympathetic to the IRD (Carl C. H. Henry, an IRD founder, is also the founding editor of Christianity Today). After the storm broke out in 1983, it carried one major piece that in essence said the NCC's own liberal rhetoric caused it to get "such bad press."[39] Christianity Today also gave 30 column inches to the findings of the United methodist Reporter as further evidence of the general accuracy of the two main media attacks on the national council.[40]

Hypothesis II is supported, then, only in the case of the interde-

nominational journals. This is surprising in that these journals, accustomed to dealing in controversial issues and with space to treat them in depth, might have been expected to do more with substantive issues than the church periodicals.

Hypothesis III

If we define validation of this hypothesis as finding that "60 Minutes" is cited twice as often as the Reader's Digest by editors in their reactions to the two media treatments, then the hypothesis can not be proven. The article and the TV segment came out within a few weeks of one another. Most church publications are monthly, with content planned weeks in advance, so by the time editors were prepared to respond to Reader's Digest they also had "60 Minutes" to consider. The result was that overwhelmingly their editorial reactions were to both media attacks and seldom distinguished between them. Only AD and the United Methodist Reporter responded to the Reader's Digest in issues that went to press before the CBS show aired in late January. Six NCC church media responded to the media attacks jointly, and two others dealt separately with the TV show. Of the interdenominational journals, only Christian Century carried specific editorials on the issue, one on the Reader's Digest and two on "60 Minutes."

When we turn to the qualitative dimension, and how seriously the media approached the two main attacks, a more significant pattern emerges. The NCC itself, admittedly not a part of this content study, had not bothered to respond to the Reader's Digest but prepared and distributed a 2,500-word point-by-point rebuttal to the program entitled "The Gospel According to '60 Minutes'."[41] It was reprinted in full by the A.M.E. Christian Recorder and mentioned prominently in other church

publications. An editorial in the Christian Recorder described "Blue Monday" at the NCC's New York headquarters following Sunday's "60 Minutes" show, and pointed out that this was the second attack on the NCC in a month. The council had survived similar attacks, the writer said, "but this time, they had come face-to-face with the giant medium--television."[42] The United Methodist Reporter dismissed the Reader's Digest article as "vicious and unfair," hardly worth a rational response.[43] But "60 Minutes" occasioned an editor's analysis filling more than half a broadsheet page. After acknowledging the huge "60 Minutes" audience and "the relative power of an audio-visual image alongside a printed page," the editor asserted that this treatment couldn't "simply be dismissed as another irresponsible attack."[44] He went on to give thoughtful treatment to many of the issues Morley Safer had raised. A similar pattern is seen in the Christian Century's "ho-hum, they're at it again" response to the Reader's Digest alluded to earlier, but in this case Editor James M. Wall devoted long editorials on both Feb. 16[45] and March 9[46] to what he felt were both CBS's and the IRD's mistaken views of the church's role as portrayed in "60 Minutes."

Of perhaps equal significance is the escalating volume of coverage of the NCC issue in the aftermath of the "60 Minutes" program, and little indication of such interest after only the Reader's Digest article. Two cautionary points are in order, however: (1) it had been widely known in late 1982 that both media were planning critical pieces on the NCC, and some editors could have been waiting for the other shoe to drop before commenting; and (2) it might have taken the one-two punch to raise the issue to the level where it could not have been avoided. But given all the above, it is this writer's strong impression, based on all the

articles and columns and editorials, that the Reader's Digest alone would have triggered a mild amount of coverage at best. Conversely, "60 Minutes" alone would probably have produced most of the coverage we see reflected in this study. These are guesses, but educated ones.

CONCLUSIONS

Was there agenda-setting by the Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes" in the development of this issue? Yes and no. The data indicate that when such mass media chose to focus their attention on clarges of leftist bias by the NCC, even NCC church-related publications felt compelled, however reluctantly in some cases, to give it attention themselves. And more general media, the news weeklies and journals of opinion, followed along because the topic now had reached the threshold of news value for them and their audiences.

But if we look at agenda-setting in the deeper sense of setting the terms of debate on the issue, then a conclusion is harder to draw. A well-staffed news organization such as that of the United Methodist Reporter used the occasion to investigate every aspect of the NCC's operation and to render as objective an assessment as possible. But the NCC denominational magazines , in the main, were more apt to attack the messengers and their sources (chiefly the IRD), carry a few stories reflecting mostly the NCC's defense, and then put the issue aside. Even the news weeklies and journals of opinion gave the issue one-shot treatment for the most part.

If we look at the episode from the perspective of the IRD, and accept for the moment the oft-stated view that it was the real catalyst for the coverage as part of its long ideological battle with the NCC, it victory in making the issue public may have been pyrrhic. Instead of

a reasoned debate, it got a largely emotional one, and saw its own motives and conservative associations made a substitute argument. In fairness, however, critics argued that the highly charged media pieces made reasoned debate impossible. Which leads to the suggestion that using mass media to dramatize an issue carries with it destructive side effects. If the issue is put into a form stark and dramatic enough to galvanize media and public attention, then the presentation itself may take center stage rather than the substantive argument a group wants to put on the agenda.

A final observation: No attempt was made here to assess the impact of the entire episode on the NCC itself. Still, one anecdote may be instructive. At its semi-annual meeting in mid-May, 1983, the NCC governing board turned down on second reading a draft policy statement on Latin America and the Caribbean. Board members felt the report unduly blamed the United States for the problems in the region, and that it failed to criticize persecution of the church by governments in Cuba and Grenada at the same time it criticized similar acts by the region's right-wing dictatorships. Six months earlier, before the attacks by the Reader's Digest and "60 Minutes," the board had approved the first reading of the policy draft without debate.[47]

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FOOTNOTES

1. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-setting Function of the Media," Public Opinion Quarterly, 36: 176-87.

2. David H. Weaver, Doris A. Graber, Maxwell E. McCombs and Chaim Eyal, Media Agenda-setting in a Presidential Election: Issues, Images and Interest (New York: Praeger, 1981).

3. Fay Lomax Cook, Tom R. Tyler, Edward G. Goetz, Margaret T. Gordon, David Protess, Donna R. Leff and Harvey L. Molotch, "Media and Agenda-setting: Effects on the Public, Interest Group Leaders, Policy Makers, and Policy," Public Opinion Quarterly, 47: 16-35.

4. Shailendra Ghorpade, "Political Spots: Setting the Agenda for Voter Decisions," paper presented to the Advertising Division of the 1985 annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, Aug. 3-6, 1985, Memphis, Tenn.

5. Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1922), 364.

6. National Council of Churches (Constant H. Jacquet, Jr., Editor), Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches--1985 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985). These and other references to the sizes of council member churches are taken from this source.

7. Rael Jean Isaac, "Do You Know Where Your Church Offerings Go?" Reader's Digest, January, 1983, pp. 120-125.

8. "The Gospel According to Whom?" CBS News (a segment of "60 Minutes"), broadcast on Jan. 23, 1983.

9. Stanley High, "Methodism's Pink Fringe," Reader's Digest, February, 1950, pp. 134-138.

10. J. M. Wall, Editorial, "Ho-hum, the 'Digest' Is At It Again," Christian Century, Jan. 26, 1983, p. 60.

11. Charles Austin, "National Council Faces New Type of Critic," New York Times, Nov. 3, 1982, p. A9.

12. Ibid.

13. Probably the most detailed treatment of the IRD's growth, personnel and funding is to be found in Leon Howell, "Old Wine, New Bottles: A Short History of the IRD," Christianity and Crisis, March 21, 1983, p. 74ff.

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18. "End Support for Controversial Church Councils?" U.S. News and World Report, Nov. 7, 1983, pp. 55-56.

19. Michael Novak, "The Snoop Report, National Review, Dec. 11, 1981, p. 1486.

20. New York Times, p. A9.

21. Charles Austin, "New Clergy Group Assails Church Aid to Leftists," New York Times, Feb. 16, 1983, p. B9.

22. Editorial, "Mission and Ecumenism," Orthodox Church, February, 1983, p. 6.

23. National Council of Churches, "The Gospel According to '60 Minutes'," pamphlet issued January, 1983.

24. The 1985 IMS/Ayer Directory of Publications (Fort Washington, Pa.: IMS Press, 1985).

25. Editorial, "Let the Reader Beware: It's Not Safe to Believe All You Read," United Methodist Reporter, Jan. 14, 1983, p. 2.

26. Spurgeon M. Dunnam III, "In Search of Truth, Perspective in the Midst of a Word-storm," United Methodist Reporter, Feb. 4, 1983, p. 2.

27. Ibid.

28. Spurgeon M. Dunnam III, "A Letter from the Editor," United Methodist Reporter, April 1, 1983, p. 2.

29. _____, "Reformed NCC Needed: More Balance, Accountability, Strength," United Methodist Reporter, April 8, 1983, p. 2.

30. _____, "A Letter from the Editor," April 1, 1983.

31. Robert McAfee Brown, "Laughter in Pleasantville: A Fable," Christian Century, Feb. 2-9, 1983, pp. 86-87.

32. _____, "The Gospel According to Morley Safer," Christian Century, March 2, 1983, pp. 183-86.

33. James M. Wall, Editorial, "A Religious Mandate to be Involved," Christian Century, March 9, 1983, p. 203.

34. Richard John Neuhaus, "The IRD and Church Dialogue," Christian Century, April 6, 1983, pp. 317-20.

35. John Wicklein, "'60 Minutes' Sounds the Alarm," Christianity and Crisis, Feb. 21, 1983, pp. 41-44.

36. Howell, op cit.

37. Roger Shinn, "Faith and Politics: The Mission to Speak," Christianity and Crisis, March 21, 1983, pp. 85-88.

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42. Dell Omega Grant (guest editor), "Blue Monday (Follows '60 Minutes' Sunday)," A.M.E. Christian Recorder, April 4, 1983, p. 4.

43. Spurgeon Dunnam III, "Let the Reader Beware: It's Not Safe to Believe All You Read," United Methodist Reporter, Jan. 14, 1983, p. 2.

44. _____, "In Search of Truth, Perspective in the Midst of a Word-storm," United Methodist Reporter, Feb. 4, 1983, p. 2.

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